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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 003094

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SUBJECT: CONGRESS COMES TO POWER IN RAJASTHAN

REF: NEW DELHI 3066

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: After a five-year gap, the Congress Party returned to power in Rajasthan as poll results were announced on December 8. Congress soundly defeated the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), winning 98 out of 200 seats in the state assembly. Despite spiraling commodity prices and the escalating terrorist threat, caste affiliations and local issues prevailed as the top determining factors in the hotly contested race. The Mumbai attacks appear to have had minimal effect on voter behavior in Rajasthan, sending the BJP leadership back to the drawing board ahead of national elections due by May 2009. END SUMMARY.

Decisive Congress Win

12. (U) On December 8, the Congress Party soundly defeated the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje in Rajasthan state assembly elections. Over 36 million eligible voters cast their votes for the 200-seat Rajasthan state assembly on December 4, and the results were announced on December 8 along with five other states that had gone to polls recently (septel). Congress won in 98 constituencies, signaling the party's return to power in the state after a five-year gap. The BJP won 75 seats, while other regional/local parties moved ahead in 27 other constituencies.

Local Issues Dominate

13. (U) While development, inflation and terrorism continue to rank as top voter concerns, Rajasthan elections were decided on candidates' caste affiliations and local issues. The Congress Party attracted votes from Jat, Gujjar and Meena communities, which helped party efforts to topple the incumbent BJP. The Jat votes, which sided with BJP in 2003, split down the middle this time around. Some sections of the Jats had become disillusioned by sharp land and water disputes with the Raje government. A large portion of Gujjars have flocked to Congress, spurred by the BJP's perceived inability to deliver on promises for additional education and job preferences (Ref. A). The sizable Meena community, which had enjoyed favored treatment by Raje, has also swung to Congress in response to additional reservations being granted to the rival Gujjar community by Raje.

Litmus Test for Raje

14. (U) The Congress Party campaigned on Raje's poor development record and perceived rampant corruption in her administration. Congress candidates pointed to the state land development initiative as a prime example of government negligence, in which Raje's administration has lined its pockets by confiscating prime land for development purposes from farmers or buying at below-market prices. While anti-incumbency may have played a role in the BJP's defeat, Raje's failure to deliver basic needs, particularly water and energy, figured prominently in her party's defeat. As noted by a NDTV correspondent, incumbent parties in three election states of Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh were re-elected, which may indicate that "anti-incumbency" may be overcome by good governance and delivery of services from elected officials.

Mumbai Effect?

15. (U) Following the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, political observers expected some form of public backlash against the Congress Party in Rajasthan and other election states. However, the outcome in Rajasthan underlies the strength of caste-based and local issues. Even before the Mumbai attacks, the BJP had campaigned on the "soft-on-terror" charge against the Congress, in hopes that it would translate to votes in state and, eventually, national polls.

It's the Candidates, Not the Message

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16. (U) In what appears to be an effort to deflect criticism of their failed "soft-on-terror" campaign, BJP officials have framed their party's loss in the state as a failure of individual candidates, particularly Raje, to lead the state and attract votes. "Even before the Mumbai attack, terrorism was an issue for us just as the issue of price rise," said party spokesperson Ravi Shankar Prasad. According to Congress Party officials, the party's victory in Rajasthan is a referendum on BJP attempts to "politicize" terrorism ahead of national elections. Congress called for a unified front to combat aggressive militancy in the country.

The BSP Factor

17. (U) Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) won at least seven seats backed by a coalition of upper castes and Dalits. Political observers had expected BSP to gain five seats, but the party appears to have squeezed enough votes from Congress candidates thereby adding a new dimension to the state and national political landscape. The BSP has gained support throughout northern India in the last five years and, based on its showing in Rajasthan, is expected to make an impact in upcoming national elections in 2009.

BJP: Back to the Drawing Board

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The BJP has pounded on the themes of inflation and terrorism for months before the attacks in Mumbai. However, the outcome of elections has proved that these issues have not resonated with the local population in Rajasthan, a primarily rural state with few urban centers. Local issues, such as the delivery of water and energy, were priority issues for the Rajasthani voter. Ahead of national elections next year, the BJP will be hard pressed to construct an effective campaign that speaks to the common man. END COMMENT.

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